

Homeless Shelter Workers in Midwestern Urban Centers

Archie Green Fellows Project AFC2016034

Oral History of Carrie Grosz, Executive Director of Carrie's Kids

Bismarck, North Dakota on April 4, 2017

Summary of Interview

Carrie Grosz started Carrie's Kids and serves as its Executive Director. Carrie's Kids is located at 1223 South 12th Street, #3, Bismarck, North Dakota, 58504 and is a nonprofit for area low-income children. Carrie's Kids offers an afterschool drop-in, clothing, meals, special events, and support and intervention for homeless and low-income children in abusive, neglectful or other dangerous circumstances.

This interview took place at Carrie's Kids, at the address above.

Interview Log

- 00:00:01 Introduction
- 00:00:09 Discussion of the origins of Carrie's Kids (CK); worked with homeless kids and families in the schools (2003); recognized that getting to school was just one of many issues facing low-income families such as cramped and crowded homes, cold North Dakota winters; started (2006) small with a monthly girls club based out of Trinity Lutheran Church; discussion of how kids in poverty take on adult issues like how to get enough food; fulfilling basic needs like snow boots; items you don't find in a thrift shop or food pantry; Project Homeless Connect;
- 00:03:04 In 2016 CK served 600 children; wants kids to be excited to be there; discussion of having a secure, locked program; Specific program components are:
- Back-to-school event for outreach and to provide clothing and school supplies;
 - Christmas Shop where children can get gifts for people in their household to teach them about giving and relationships; story about a tomboy gifted pink frilly things;
- 00:08:01 Discussion of the types of things people donate; continued description of program components:
- Clearance sale this spring; donations she doesn't know what to do with but maybe someone wants it;
 - Thanksgiving dinner;
 - Halloween Party;
 - Winter warm up: distributing warm clothes, blankets;
 - Many smaller events like getting ready for Prom; just gave away 150 prom dresses; free dental day;
- 00:09:23 Discussion of programs helping to overcome financial barriers; low-income people feel they can't participate if they can't afford it; importance of teaching even middle schoolers to think about college and financing opportunities; story of an orthodontist offering to put kids in braces;

00:11:50 Daily activities include:

- Clubs;
- Weekend community service opportunities;

Discussion of children and addiction; other serious issues Carrie sees include:

- eating disorders
- cutting, self-harm;
- suicidal thinking

Carrie has two cell phones, one for kids calling her for help so she can keep them on the phone while using the other phone to call for additional help; discussion of living in smaller, spread out communities where problems are more “hidden”; discussion of the dearth of kids’ activities for out-of-school time;

00:15:38 Story about a girl and abuse; discussion of why children won’t/can’t talk about abuse: adult doubt, breaking up the family, societal judgment; discussion about judgment today of people of different nationalities or low-income; inequitable access to healthcare, counseling and treatment;

00:17:24 Story of a young girl losing her sight; discussion of blaming the parents, underestimating child trauma and overestimating children’s ability to recover quickly;

00:22:36 Story of a young man in her boy’s club; kids need consistency, compassion; behavioral difference in responding to kids; example of North Dakota providers as offering different ways to reach people;

00:29:49 Carrie’s history; in high school worked at a soup kitchen;

00:30:13 Lower class can’t succeed if programs are cut; story of a mom working three jobs; story of dad who has felonies; illiteracy; trailers without running water or broken furnace in winter; societal judgment that people just need to work harder; today an apartment rents for \$1,200 when it rented for \$250 before the oil boom; an efficiency for \$875/month, for someone working full-time at \$10/hour;

00:34:48 Story of a young man at CK who has overcome addiction; story of a family helped by other people who were also low-income; discussion that even kids in families that make good money have suffering children; sixty youth at CK last night; story of a young man caring for CK space;

00:39:26 Description of Carrie’s Kids’ physical space, built it out; kitchen, clothing room; kids helped clean and paint;

00:41:11 Volunteers;

00:42:26 Homeless kids; shelter is limited; North Dakota doesn’t allow emancipation of youth until 18 years old, but kids can drop out of school at 16; limits of the systems: people don’t have to let social services or police (without a warrant) in their homes; systems’ act punitively “do this or else this will happen”; connection with police officers and landlords; focus on “creative empowerment” so kids have a plan to be safe at home; discussion of strong cases for removing children from dangerous homes being turned down by the court;

00:45:09 People’s limited resources; changes such as Obamacare and requirement to have renters’ insurance; there are more rules for people in poverty; story about a family whose rental

- agreement changed with the oil boom demand for housing; goal is to work with the kids rather than adults, but things like this necessitate helping the family;
- 00:47:41 Story of kids reunified with mother; discussion of the factors that complicate an “idealistic” effort to report an abusive parent;
- 00:50:08 Carrie’s Kids funding entirely private donations, mostly from individuals; board handles financials, including donations; board is part business team and part street savvy team; story of Carrie assisting a frightened child; story of mom with repeated criminal charges;
- 00:55:46 Carrie is the only staff; doesn’t want to write grants to pay staff; discussion of rules and policies and procedures; discussion of a succession plan for CK;
- 00:59:58 Discussion of donations; unexpected gifts; story of someone who wanted to donate toys, but instead held a fundraiser for medical care for a child;
- 01:01:58 Carrie’s philosophy and work style; the priority of being able to respond to kids’ crises immediately; she continually reevaluates her work; strategies of dealing with kids not getting along at her site; discussion of what some people call her “rewarding work” in the light of suffering children; story of a girl and trauma;
- 01:10:02 Systemic solutions; everyone has a role; politics box people in; philosophy of loving people into a better place; as simple as breathing with kids, creating and nurturing relationships; reasons people decline or are afraid to help one another; stories of kids thanking Carrie years later;
- 01:22:19 End